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Matching Hypothesis

A quick glance at couples in public settings will likely lead to the observation that people tend to pair up with those who are similar in physical attractiveness. The handsome man and the gorgeous woman date and marry each other, while their more homely counterparts pair up with their plainer counterparts. Similarity in physical attractiveness also occurs in gay and lesbian couples. In everyday language, this is referred to as dating in "one's league;" a person assumed to be unattainable because of being so much more physically attractive than onself is described as "out of one's league." Occasionally, however, one will see a couple who, a quick glance, seems mismatched. He may be older and unattractive. She's young and beautiful. What attracted them to each other? In this entry, we discuss the *matching hypothesis*, first introduced in the 1960s, to refer to the tendency for people to pair up with others who are equally physically attractive (unattractive). We also discuss *complex matching*, which occurs when people are able to attract partners far more physically attractive than themselves by offering compensatory assets—say, status, power, or financial standing.

The Original Matching Hypothesis and the Classic Dance Study to Test It

Elaine Hatfield (Walster) and her colleagues proposed the original version of the Matching Hypothesis. Based on Kurt Lewin's Level of Aspiration theory, they proposed that in making dating and mating choices, people will choose someone of their own level of social desirability. Theoretically, they will be influenced by both the desirability of the potential match (What they want) and their perception of the probability of obtaining that date (What they think they can get). They referred to such mating choices as *realistic choices*, because they are influenced by the chances of having one's affection reciprocated.

They tested the matching hypothesis in a classic dance study. In this study, 752 freshmen at the University of Minnesota were invited to attend a get-acquainted dance.   When the participants picked up their free tickets, a panel of judges surreptitiously rated the students' physical attractiveness. Also available from either University records or additional measures completed by the participants was information on personality, grade point average, and social skills. The freshmen students were randomly matched with partners. The success of these matches was assessed via a survey distributed during the dance's intermission and in a four- to six-month follow up.   True, before the dance, the more attractive the student, the more attractive they assumed their date would be. Nonetheless, once participants had met their matches, *regardless of their own physical attractiveness,* participants reacted more positively to physically attractive dates and were more likely to try to arrange subsequent dates with the physically attractive. Self-esteem, intelligence, and personality did not affect liking for the dates or subsequent attempts to date them. This study, then, did *not* find any support for the matching hypothesis.

In Search of Evidence for the Matching Hypothesis: Follow-up Experimental Studies

The dance study was criticized as not reflecting the reality of the dating marketplace because in the computer dance setting there was no or little chance of rejection, at least for the evening of the dance. Thus, follow-up experimental studies were conducted in which college students, in laboratory settings, were asked to react to profile information about "potential dates." The researchers manipulated the dates' physical attractiveness and sometimes presented bogus information on how likely the date would be to enter a relationship with the respondent. Similar to the findings from the classic dance study, most people – regardless of how attractive they were – reacted more positively to profiles of attractive dates than of unattractive dates. Although learning one could be rejected by a potential date had a dampening effect on reactions to the other, overall the physical attractiveness effect (liking someone more, the more attractive he/she was) predominated over a matching effect or a concern about rejection.

Observations of Actual Couples

Data collected in the real world, however, told another story. Social psychologists measured the attractiveness level of each partner of actual couples. They did this in various ways but tried to be objective as possible, often asking more than one "judge" to provide the ratings and having the ratings of one member of the couple done independently of the ratings of the other member (often through photographs). Here, there was strong evidence found for the matching hypothesis. Similarity has been found between the partners' levels of physical attractiveness in real couples.

Preferences versus Realistic Choices versus What Actually Occurs

One explanation for the diverse findings across contexts is in these disparate studies scholars are studying different phenomena. Although the *matching hypothesis* is most often referred to as a single hypothesis, there may be at least three separate sub-hypotheses included within. As noted by S. Michael Kalick, one may make a distinction among *preferences*, *realistic choices*, and what *actually occurs* (i.e., what people will settle for).

1) *Preferences*: In a strongest form of the matching hypothesis, it would be proposed that people prefer to match with partners of their own level of attractiveness. (No evidence has been found for this, however. What do people prefer, if issues of possible rejection or competition are not salient? Most people prefer someone who is physically attractive. For those who are physically attractive, what they want and what they can get are identical. For those who are unattractive, however, desire conflicts with reality. In making their choices, they must balance the two.)

2) *Realistic choices*: What do people choose under more realistic social situations, where they must approach someone (or wait to be approached), and social rejection is a very real possibility? Under these conditions, Hatfield and her colleagues proposed that—although prefer an ideal partner—they would be likely to choose to approach

someone of approximately their own level of attractiveness. This form of the hypothesis distinguishes between preferences and choices.

3) *The Reality:* The reality considers everything—what a person desires, whether the other wants him/her in return, and market considerations (including whether other desirable alternatives come along for one or both of them). In real life, people settle for mating within "their league" whether they want to or not.

Of these three forms of the matching hypothesis, the least amount of support has been found for the first version (people yearn for the ideal, regardless of the possibility of attaining it), the most support has been found for the third version (in the end, most people settle for attainable relationships.)

More Complex Matching

Although the original matching hypothesis proposed that people would pair up with someone as "socially desirable" as themselves—choosing people who were equal in a panoply of assets—over time the matching hypothesis has come to be associated specifically with matching on *physical attractiveness.* However, people come to a relationship offering many desirable characteristics. A person may compensate for a lack of physical attractiveness with a charming personality, kindness, status, money, and so forth. The notion that individuals can sometimes compensate for their lack of attractiveness by offering other desirable traits has been termed "complex matching." As social psychologists point out, a traditional type of pairing is gender-linked: An older wealthy, successful man pairs with a younger, attractive woman.

Third Party Assistance and the Matching Principle

Today, most people make their own dating and mating choices. The original matching hypothesis was proposed as an explanation for individuals' decisions about their own mating and dating choices.   Nonetheless, matching is sometimes assisted by third parties—friends, families, and by Internet dating sites. It is likely that friends, families, and matching services also consider physical attractiveness and other desirable traits as they determine who will make suitable matches.

Conclusions

Many years ago, sociologist Erving Goffman observed that in America, a proposal of marriage occurred when a man calculated the worth of his own social suggested to a woman that here assets weren't so much better as to "preclude a merger." Goffman and social psychologists who proposed and tested the matching hypothesis were keen observers of the dating and mating marketplace.   Today there is compelling evidence that although men and women may yearn for the ideal mate, when the time comes to make a choice they generally settle for the "art of the possible."

Susan Sprecher and Elaine Hatfield

See also: Assortative Mating, Equity Theory, Exchange Processes

Further Readings

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